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SEAFARERS AND PASSENGERS WHO DISAPPEAR WITHOUT A TRACE FROM ABOARD SHIPS

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ABSTRACT

It is a fact that not only ships, but also seafarers and passengers vanish without a trace at sea, be it in the past or in present times. Several examples for this phenomenon are given. A scheme of the ship conditions found after discovering that single persons or even whole crews had disappeared from board is provided as an orientation, before describing in detail the more than 18 reasons for vanishing from ships for good, giving examples where appropriate. These reasons are in their majority logical, but strange and bizarre reasons also exist. Causes may e.g. be the sea state, crimes, suicide, alcohol, piracy. A chapter concerning passengers lost from large modern cruise ships, especially in the Caribbean, follows. Finally, suggestions are made, for instance psychological aptitude tests, as regards how to maybe help decrease the number of disappearing persons, especially young seafarers, from aboard ships on the high seas.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of discrete, silent or covert (active or passive) vanishing of seamen from ships of all types and sizes at sea is almost certainly as old as seafaring itself.

Reliable and verifiable numbers as to those who disappear at sea all over the world cannot be found, and the true number – for several reasons – should be and is, most probably, much higher than one would expect.

The author has brought forth the topic of „vanishing without a trace“ because he first of all thinks that it has not yet been investigated in depth, and secondly because it becomes more and more exciting the deeper you get involved in the problem.

In this paper the author would like to begin by dealing with the different types of these mysterious disappearances, then with their causes, and finally with eventual possibilities and methods of reducing the number of such occurrences. The description may start with a brief historic review of the problem.

HISTORIC REVIEW

A few examples of such occurrences are given.

On 5 December 1872, the brigantine „MARIE CELESTE“ was found drifting between the Azores and Portugal. The whole crew had disappeared without a trace. The rudder turned to and fro freely. All lifeboats, as well as sextant and chronometer were missing, however none of the personal belongings of the crew members.

Between the 17th and 21st November 1891, 24 firemen, 1 sailor and 1 steward vanished from the 2024 ton ship MS „SOMMERFELD“.

In 1893 and 1894, the Maritime Court in Hamburg held 32 court sessions concerning 32 vanished seafarers. 28 of them had been coal stokers on steam ships.

On 29 January 1921, the 3500 ton 4 mast schooner „CARROL DEERING“, en route from Rio to Norfolk, sent a radio message to the light ship off Cape Lookout, North Carolina, that – except for a lost anchor - everything was in order. However, 2 days later the ship was found stranded with sails set, only a few miles distant from the light ship. The „CARROL DEERING“ was empty and there were no traces of the 12 man crew. A search totalling 70 days was without success.

Such examples of disappearing seamen can be given for practically every year.

TYPES AND VARIETIES OF VANISHING OF PEOPLE FROM ABOARD SHIPS

From the indisputable fact that individuals as well as several persons and even occasionally complete crews have vanished from board without a trace for good – and this in most of the sea and ocean regions - and from studying the data at the author's disposal, we would like to give the reader the following orientation scheme in order to better be able to understand the problem lying before us.

Single persons up to whole crews can vanish without a trace:

- without taking any personal belongings or ship items with them, or they do take something,
- without taking or using life jackets, liferafts, lifeboats etc., or these are used,
- by leaving calmly, or abandoning the ship in haste or frantically,
- peacefully, i.e. with no signs of being forced or of a fight,
- voluntarily and at ease, or because of a dangerous or forceful situation occurring inside or coming from outside of the ship

The crew may abandon the ship leaving behind:

- an intact seaworthy ship in good working order,
- a ship with engines running and lights on,
- a floating, however slightly, non severely or severely damaged ship,
- a drifting wreck, or
- a stranded ship.

REASONS FOR VANISHING FROM ABOARD SHIPS AT SEA

There are many reasons why seafarers and even – though less well known among the general population - passengers disappear from ships on the high seas. These causes are in the majority logical, but there are also strange and bizarre reasons as well, and some are almost incredible. In research for this paper, the author was finally able to compile the, by no means complete, list below, giving examples of actual cases when deemed necessary.

Accidents

These can be self-caused or due to technical reasons, leading to a falling or slipping overboard

An example: on 24 March 1990, a ship mechanic fell overboard from the ship MS „CHRISTA“ north of Bornholm while lashing a tarpaulin over a cargo on deck, and was never found again. He had laid himself on the ballooning tarpaulin to press it down with his weight. When changing his position, the strong westsouthwest wind of 7 Bft made the tarpaulin flap upward, tossing him overboard (13).

Weather conditions, wind and storm

Within the last 10 or more years, storm and wind intensities at sea are increasing in force and number, also the occurrences of freak and unexpected sudden storms, accounting for seafarers being swept overboard.

The Gulf of Biscay, the Durban Coast region of South Africa and also other areas have been known to be dangerous areas for sailing because of strong currents and winds. Rough weather may contribute to accidents aboard ships.

Waves, also in good weather

Freak or rogue waves with an unbelievable height (according to the latest data) of up to max. 60 meters!

According to latest data, tsunami waves, beginning far from land, caused many losses among crews of ships.

An example: on 1 February 1990, a stewardess was swept from the deck of the MS „Ludwigshafen Express“ in the North Atlantic by a wave that swamped the deck. She vanished without a trace (See-BG, Hamburg, 1990).

Criminal offences, homicides, crimes, with overboard disposal of corpses

An example: a Taiwanese trawler captain was sentenced to life imprisonment after murdering more than half the 25 man crew (Chinese, Philipinos, Taiwanese) on the 5 January 1999 while the ship „CHIN CHING No.12“ was 1000 nautical miles northeast of Mauritius. He first shot 2 seamen who had made complaints. He threw their bodies overboard, assisted by the 2nd officer and 2nd engineer and then went raging through the ship killing 9 more seafarers with his pistol, or battering them with it, and flinging them into the sea. Four fishermen jumped overboard in panic(!) and another one was hit in his right arm by a stray bullet. These crimes only became known when the trawler reached Mauritius on 20 February 1999 after 6 months at sea! (6).

According to ITF (International Transport Workers Federation), it is the worst case of harassment of foreign crews that ITF had ever heard of (ITF Seeleute Bulletin, 2000).

The problem of work-related homicides among seafarers was studied by S. Roberts (15). In a paper published in the IMH journal in 2004, he analysed homicides among various defined populations. during the period 1976-2002.

The homicide rate was 1.5 per 100 000 seamen/years in the British merchant fleet, was 3.71 in the Singapore fleet, and was 3.74 in the Hong Kong fleet.

Among British seafarers homicides were largely caused by attacks from assailants, other than colleagues, that occurred ashore. Among Asian seafarers, most homicides resulted from disputes among colleagues that mainly occurred on board ships. In some cases, the corpse may have been thrown overboard.

In another study of the same author published in the IMH journal in 2003, on mortality among British seafarers employed in flags of convenience shipping, there were 200 cases of death noted, and among them 3 homicides (16).

Mutiny on ships

On 15 March 1970, 2 American merchant marine sailors using guns seized control of their ship, the SS „COLUMBIA EAGLE“ and ordered 24 of the crew to abandon it in life boats. This was the first armed mutiny on a US ship in 150 years.

Alcohol and drug abuse

This has led to many, especially young seamen, silently falling (disbalance, showing off etc) from the ship with ensuing rapid hypothermia and impaired gluconeogenesis in the cold water and vanishing.

An example: on 4 May1998, seaman G. fell overboard from HMAS „DARWIN“ near Christmas Island and disappeared after a drinking session (8).

Narcotics and drug abuse can be responsible for a small number of seamen disappearing from ships.

Concealed and dormant prevailing psychophysical diseases

They may cause accidents among crew members and lead to their disappearance from aboard ships, as well as to syncopes, fainting, orthostatic collapse, dizziness caused by heights,

Extreme exhaustion and fatigue

Such cases may be caused by overwork, some watch systems, heat and high ambient humidity, dehydration, and work stress. These factors may also lead to a seafarer vanishing from a ship.

Suicides

Voluntary death cases (10) are, among other reasons for disappearance of seafarers from aboard ship, due to:

- isolation of a person on board, especially in cases of very young seamen who have no substitute father figure among other crew members, and are troubled by problems at home, depression, monotony of work and life at sea,
- mental stress and strain on board, mental terror, mobbing by officers or other crew members, feeling of hopelessness,
- motion sickness leading to a breakdown in personality and/or the will to live.

In their publication "Handbook of Nautical Medicine", Goethe et al., in 1984, described the problem of suicides among seafarers. As depression gets worse, there is the ever present risk of suicide by jumping overboard. The sea can hold a morbid attraction for depressive individuals (5).

Roberts (1998), while investigating occupational mortality in British, Singapore and Hong Kong merchant fleets from 1981-1995, found that 50 seafarers died through suicide, the ratio between the 3 countries being 27: 15: 8. A further 66 seafarers vanished at sea, many of whom took their own lives (suicide) by jumping overboard (9).

In a study on mortality among British seafarers employed in flags of convenience shipping published by S. Roberts in the IMH journal in 2003, he reported that there were 7 suicides among the total number of 200 deaths of seafarers. Some of them took their own lives by jumping overboard (16).

Roberts et al. (2005), evaluating traumatic work related mortality in British merchant shipping from 1976-2002, found a total of 835 deaths of which 55 were due to suicides, whereas 30 jumped overboard (11).

Swimming

It has happened that in calm still water at sea - when the ship seems to be motionless - after unfortunately not always lowering the anchor, seamen went swimming in that calm, still water and could not get back on board, either because the lower end of ladder was too high to reach, or the ship slowly drifted away in a very

slight current or breeze etc., and some of them disappeared. This can be a very tragic situation, which, as inquiries show, happens from time to time.

Piracy

Individual seafarers right up to whole crews have been forced by pirates in various parts of the world, e.g. South China Sea, Malacca Straits, to jump into the sea or into lifeboats/liferafts, were shot in the water or killed and thrown overboard as files/investigations by Lloyds of London, and of the Marine Accident Investigation Board (MAIB), Kuala Lumpur, have proved time and again. Later the ship has sometimes been found drifting abandoned –with valuable cargoes looted – maybe with a new name painted on the bow, or as a wreck on the beach.

Many of these unfortunate hijacked seafarers were lost for good, others were later found drifting on flotsam in despair with hair-raising stories to tell.

Ship capsizings/sinkings that were not

At sea, seafarers have a saying that in a tragedy it is best to stay on board as long as possible as the vessel provides protection from the elements, i.e. the cold, rough ocean and bad weather. However, with anticipated or imminent danger, ship officers and ratings have been known to abandon a ship prematurely, for example in a bad storm.

They vanished in their lifeboats, liferafts or lifejackets, and when the storm finally was over, the vessel was found in an (almost) perfect condition, but abandoned, except maybe for the ship's mascot cat or dog left behind.

Giant squids

There are rare incidents of individual seafarers being snatched from low lying ship decks by the tentacles of giant squids. They can have a maximum length of approx. 20 meters. New knowledge of 15 and more different types of these huge molluscs in the last 10 years through deep sea research conducted at depths down to 6000 m by marine biologists has led to a re-evaluation of what was previously considered as seamen's tales (2).

Submarines

Conventional and nuclear submarines, when surfacing or travelling just below the sea surface, have collided with and even sunk ships. A sudden impact has then thrown men from deck, some of whom vanished for good.

In recent years, a small Japanese research ship in the Pacific was hit by a US atomic submarine and disappeared with its entire crew.

Fishing nets from trawlers have also been entangled with submarines, causing seamen to be flung overboard. Cases have been reported where the submarine then dives away without giving any help or assistance.

Fata morgana

In the tropics, fata morganas occur, leading people to seeing things that were not there, luring them away, maybe to their deaths. These phenomena predominantly occur on land, e.g. deserts, but have also been reported of at sea where individuals believe seeing, for instance, a beautiful tropical island, jump into the sea to head for it, and vanish (3).

Calenture

This can be defined as a behavioural phenomenon, the predominant symptom being an irresistible impulse of the sailors to jump into the sea from their vessels. The syndrome becomes manifest only after a week or more of voyaging with no land contact. Predisposing environmental conditions are cloudlessness, calm tropical days and a horizon devoid of other ships. The sailor is alone, leaning over the outer rail of the ship, feeling physically tired, and perhaps reflecting on his life on shore..

Affected persons sometimes imagine the sea to be a green field and desire throwing themselves into it.

The forward ship motion seems to enhance calenture. It is not experienced at night.

A similar phenomenon to this is known in aviation medicine, the „breaking off phenomenon“, among scuba divers and also mountain climbers. For instance, according to the sports medical expert Prof. K. Maidorn et al. (1988), Berlin, many mountaineers jump voluntarily to their death, their non-intentional suicide caused by their high body fluid loss at altitude (up to 7 litres/day), leading them to hearing imaginary voices from within making them suddenly believe they are able to fly (8).

Other reasons

There are further strange reasons for vanishing without a trace at sea, but the author can, at present, give no exact details about them, pending future analysis. An explanation may lie in the detected magnetic/gravitational anomaly zones in specific sea and ocean regions.

DISAPPEARANCES OF CRUISE SHIP PASSENGERS

In the previous chapter, mention was made of passengers vanishing from board. Because of the enormous increase of travellers on cruise ships during the last 10 – 15 years, there is a rise in the number of them disappearing from the cruise vessels, causing concern and sometimes leading to investigations by federal agencies.

As this is not a fact the cruise companies desire the public to become aware of, statistics are seldomly made available. To give an idea of the magnitude of the tragedy when a person on vacation or honeymoon at sea is reported missing, e.g. on a > 1000 passenger cruise ship, some accessible statistics follow:

According to „Florida Today“, 15 January 2006, more than 50 people fell from cruise ships in the passed 10 years, including suicides, unsolved cases and a handful of rescues. 40 of them were fatal. Most occurred during the Caribbean/Bahamas tours (1).

An analysis by Klein, Memorial University Canada, found suicide the main reason to jump from cruise ships, totalling 18. In 20 cases the motive was unknown. Most of this latter group vanish while the ships are at sea. Klein found one known murder when a former mental patient threw a 69 year old female overboard during a cruise in Norwegian fjords in 2001.

According to Klein, men outnumber women by 2 to 1, jumping overboard quite often due to marital problems. In this case, he concluded, it is always the male that jumps overboard.

Klein makes a very important statement: „Analysing how many people jump or fall from cruise ships is difficult, as no government agency in any country tracks that information“.

In one incident, a drunk 21 years old man on the 3000 passenger Royal Caribbean cruise ship „Mariner of the seas“ was reported missing. His image was captured by an onboard video camera at about 2.15 a.m. on 15 May 2006 as he leaned against a rail on the ship's bow and then fell overboard, disappearing without a trace (4).

The Royal Caribbean „Man Over Board List“ of known incidents of passengers and crew who have fallen into the sea from cruise ships since 2000 until the 25 July 2006 is as follows: total number 29, male to female ratio 20 versus 9, average ages of males 43 versus 38 years for females. 17 of the males and 8 of the females died. 3 males and 1 female were rescued, some after swimming for up to 17 hours (12).

Royal Caribbean Cruises state that men are much more likely to fall overboard than women, the average age of passengers who jump into the water being 41 years.

SOME THOUGHTS AS HOW TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF DISAPPEARANCES FROM BOARD

One way to spare labile persons from the additional stress and strain of a seafarer's life could be a psychological screening or aptitude (selection) test as performed with civilian aviation personnel.

Those seamen „fleeing to a job on board“ – for what reasons they ever have – should be restrained from doing so. They probably are not seamen at heart.

Helpful in this context could also be specially trained experienced elderly seafarers, who could adopt a „father role“ toward younger colleagues.

However, considering the decline in crew sizes and replacing them with other nationalities, this suggestion can probably only be put into practice on a small scale.

Attention must continue to be given to the underlying problem of loneliness of crew members on ships and to novel ways of overcoming it (14). On Swedish ships alone for instance, 30 sailors disappeared at sea within 5 years, because loneliness has become unbearable for many of them (Working Environment 1993).

As regards prevention and reduction of calenture, it is known from literature sources that individual seafarers who, alone on deck, have been almost compelled to jump overboard by an „inner voice“.

They have then begged and asked for another sailor to always be present and near at hand on deck while they were working there to hinder them from vanishing without a trace, as this urge can be very strong. Increased attention to this phenomenon by ship officers might be beneficial.

This review of an important, yet not often discussed segment of maritime medicine, is intended to nurture interest in the phenomenon by those involved in this specialised field of medicine, considering the tragedy at hand and the sadness and grief of those family members and relatives left behind, not knowing where those that vanished have gone, or whether they are dead with certainty.

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